Ibn ʿArabī’s concept of *ahl al-bayt*

by Claude Addas

'*Ahlu baytī amān li ummatī*’, 'The people of my house are a safeguard for my community’. Although it is not included in any of the canonical collections,[1] this saying attributed to the Prophet is one of the innumerable traditions[2] which in Islam are the basis of the respect which the faithful have towards the *ahl al-bayt*,[3] the 'Family of the Prophet’, understood here in the broader sense and including the *shurafāʾ*, the direct descendants of the Prophet from his daughter Fātima. The expression *ahl al-bayt* appears on three occasions in the Qurʾān,[4] and one of these concerns the family – this is verse 33 of the Sura *Al-Ahzāb*, which states, 'God wants only to remove uncleanness from you, O People of the House, and to purify you completely’.

It goes without saying that the question of knowing exactly to whom the expression *ahl al-bayt* refers in this verse has given rise to endless debate. Staying with Sunni commentators, let us recall that for some, especially the illustrious Tabarī (d.313/923), *ahl al-bayt* must be understood here as referring not only to the Prophet himself, but also to his daughter Fātima, his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī, and to his two grandsons Hasan and Husayn;[5] in other words, to those who are also referred to as the *ahl al-kisāʾ*, the 'People of the Cloak’, with reference to the episode of the ordeal (*mubāhala*) to which Q. 3:61 refers.[6]

Other exegetes, however, such as Ibn Kathīr (d.774/1373) take the view that the context (*siyāq al-kalām*) in which this verse occurs, obliges us to also include the Prophet’s wives. It is in fact they who are directly referred to in the previous verses and the following one.[7]

This is also the interpretation given by Hakīm Tirmidhī (d.*ca*.300/910) in a passage of the *Nawādir al-usūl.* He quotes the verse in question, at the end of a chapter on the very subject of what meaning to give to the hadith, '*ahlu baytī amān li ummatī*’.[8] Curiously, in another text, Tirmidhī considers another hadith relating to the pre-excellence of the *ahl al-bayt* as suspect. He has no hesitation in denying it any authenticity, even though it appears in the canonical collections.[9]

Indeed the whole bearing of this hadith, or we might say this prediction, is determined by the meaning we give to the expression '*ahlu baytī*’, the 'People of my house’. For Tirmidhī *ahlu baytī* certainly refers to the lineage of the Prophet, but more specifically to his spiritual line, that of the *awliyāʾ*, the saints who attain to the highest degree of spiritual realisation, *whether or not they are descended from the blood-line of the Prophet*. It is these 'Men of God’, in the strongest meaning of the term, who are the guardians of the *umma,* the community of the Prophet, and moreover it is due to them that human kind survives.[10]

We can easily understand how the thesis presented here by Tirmidhī, going as it does against the commonly held opinion that *ahlu baytī* refers to the family of the Prophet *stricto sensu*, has given rise to concern, even among his admirers. This is notably the case with Nabhānī (d.1350/1931), who was challenged on the day following publication of the *Nawādir al-usūl*,[11] by a *sharīf* from Mecca who asked him to repudiate Tirmidhī’s statements on the subject immediately and in writing.[12] At first Nabhānī equivocated. He had never written before and felt unworthy of such a task. Moreover, he faced a serious dilemma. Tirmidhī was certainly wrong on this point, he had no doubt of that. But he was also absolutely convinced that Tirmidhī was a saint – and one of the greatest. Furthermore, it was also the opinion of a master for whom Nabhānī had the highest degree of reverence and to whom he unhesitatingly gave the title of *al-shaykh al-akbar*, 'the greatest master’ – Ibn ʿArabī.

After considerable thought, Nabhānī finally agreed to write the article in question – the first of a long series of works, many of which are dedicated to the Prophet and to the veneration which is due to him and in which he demonstrated Tirmidhī’s error, without, as he emphasises, any disrespect towards him.

But what Nabhānī did not know or pretended not to know[13] was that on the question of the concept of *ahl al-bayt*, and, incidentally, on so many others, Ibn ʿArabī broadly shared Tirmidhī’s views, except that his concept of the 'Muhammadian Family’ contains doctrinal nuances which are

not found in Tirmidhī, either in the *Nawādir* or in the *Kitāb Khatm al-awliyā*ʾ, in which this question is also addressed.[14]

Before turning to the subject itself, some lexical information is required. Ibn ʿArabī, as we know, attached the greatest importance to hermeneutics in the examination of religious vocabulary of both the Qurʾān and the hadith.[15] In this case, he insists that care must be taken to distinguish the terms *ahl* and *āl*, which are more or less synonymous in current usage. One may recall that the word *āl* is the one used in the *tasliya*, the 'Prayer upon the Prophet', at least in its earliest form, and that it is generally agreed to give it the sense of 'family' in this instance, exactly like *ahl*. According to Ibn ʿArabī, however, this is wrong. He states: 'Do not imagine that [the expression] *āl Muhammad* refers to "the people of his house"; this is not the way among the Arabs.'[16] And again he states, 'In the Arabic language, *āl al-rajul* means those who are intimate and close to a person.' In saying this, the author of the *Futūhāt* bases himself on the Qurʾānic use of the term *āl*, and more precisely on Q. 40:46, 'Make the people of Pharaoh (*āl Firʿawn*) enter into the worst of punishments'. It is quite obvious that *āl* here does not refer to Pharaoh's kin but to those of his close advisors who supported him in exercising power and were thus complicit in his errors. In the same way, he points out in connection with the prophets that the term *āl* must be understood as referring to those who were closest to them in faith, the 'Pious Gnostic Believers' (*al-sālihūn al-ʿārifūn al-muʾminūn*). So it is upon these 'men of God' and not exclusively the kin of the Prophet that the faithful believer calls down divine grace when he recites the *tasliya*, the practice of which was instituted following the revelation of verse 56 of the Sura *Al-Ahzāb*, 'God and His angels bless the Prophet, O you who believe, bless the Prophet and call down Peace upon him'. When asked by his Companions how they were to carry out this duty, the Prophet answered, 'Say: Lord, bless Muhammad and "those close to Muhammad" (*āl Muhammad*) as You blessed Abraham and "those close to Abraham" (*āl Ibrāhīm*).'[17]

In this way, Ibn ʿArabī notes, the Prophet extended the scope of the Qurʾānic injunction, enjoining the faithful to ask for the divine graces upon 'those close' to him in the same way as they were granted to 'those close to Abraham'.[18] Now among the latter, there are many to whom God granted *nubuwwa*, the status of prophet. Insofar as it refers to a law-bearing function (*nubuwwat al-tashrī*ʿ), this status is unattainable since the death of the Envoy, who was, in the Qurʾānic expression, *khātam al-nabiyyīn* (Q. 33:40), the 'seal of the prophets'. From this point of view, no one will henceforth be able to claim *nubuwwa*. This is expressed in the famous hadith according to which no prophet and no envoy will be sent forth after Muhammad.[19]

Nevertheless – and this constitutes an essential point in the hagiological doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī – prophethood does not amount to simply the exercise of judicial authority. It also implies an outstanding degree of spiritual perfection. Considered from this specific aspect, the concept of *nubuwwa* refers to a 'spiritual station' (*maqām*), which Ibn ʿArabī sometimes calls 'the station of general prophethood' (as opposed to 'legislative prophethood') and sometimes the 'station of closeness' (*maqām al-qurba*), *and which remains accessible to the most perfect among the saints*.[20] This means, Ibn ʿArabī concludes, that in conveying this formula of benediction to his people, the Prophet wished 'the people close to him' among the *ʿārifūn*, the gnostics, to be able to attain the supreme degree of sainthood, even if they are unable to exercise the *nubuwwat al-tashrī*ʿ.[21]

Needless to say, the interpretation offered here by Ibn ʿArabī for the expression *āl Muhammad* is at a considerable remove from that held by the *ʿulamā*ʾ. Moreover, it is not the only one we find from the *shaykh al-akbar*'s pen. Because the Arabic language is a polysemic language *par excellence*, and because akbarian hermeneutics draws on all semantic resources, another text from the *Futūhāt* considers a quite different, but no less subtle, meaning.

Among the accepted meanings of the term *āl* listed in the *Lisān al-ʿArab* is that of *sarāb*, 'mirage'.[22] This is the meaning Ibn ʿArabī chooses to employ in the passage in question, which appears in the long section in Chapter 73, in which he undertakes to respond to Tirmidhī's famous questionnaire.[23] Our concern is with the one hundred and fifty-first question, 'What does the expression *āl Muhammad* mean?', to which Ibn ʿArabī replies:

The āl is that which magnifies images. In fact, āl is described as the largeness of the images seen in a mirage. The āl Muhammad are thus those who are made large by Muhammad (al-ʿuzamāʾ bi Muhammad) and Muhammad, grace and peace be upon him, is like the mirage which makes the one who appears there immense. Thus, you think that you are looking at Muhammad, as one of

great stature, in the same way as you believe that the mirage is water – in fact it does appear to the eye to be water. … But when you arrive at Muhammad, it is not Muhammad that you find, it is God that you find in a Muhammadian form and due to a Muhammadian vision.[24]

Two major ideas in the initiatory teachings of Ibn ʿArabī are to be found here, expressed in the form of allusions, in these few lines of great doctrinal density. Insofar as it is the expression of man's extreme powerlessness, all neediness felt by man reveals his need for 'the One who is sufficient unto Himself'. It is like a cry for help – albeit mute – addressed to the Eternal. And because the theophanies necessarily assume the forms of the receptacle in which they are contained, when God responds to this call, He does so by revealing Himself in the form of what is expected of Him. Just as Moses, when he had gone in search of fire, saw God in the form of the Burning Bush, so too the man who is dying of thirst searches for Him in the place in which he longs with all his being to find water.[25] So too, the one who has gone in search of the Prophet is certain to meet his Lord at the end of his quest. Moreover – and this second point is the essential theme of the passage – he will have the most perfect knowledge there could be:

The manifestation of God in the mirror of the Prophet is the most perfect, the most accurate, and the most beautiful; when you perceive Him in the mirror of the Prophet you perceive a perfection that you cannot perceive when contemplating Him in your own mirror. … Therefore, do not try to contemplate God anywhere but in the mirror of the Prophet, grace and peace be upon him.[26]

In fact, insofar as the Prophet – or, more exactly the 'Muhammadian Reality' of which he is the personification – is the perfect 'copy of God' (*nuskhat al-haqq*), and thus possesses all the divine attributes, 'The knowledge he has of God is the same knowledge that God has of Himself', as Jīlī expressed it.[27] Consequently, it is by walking in the footsteps of the Prophet, or in other words by adhering closely to him as the 'excellent model' (*uswa hasana*, Q. 33:21), that the wayfarer attains the highest knowledge of God:

Persist then in following and imitating him, and do not set foot in a place where you do not see the footprint of your Prophet; set your foot in the imprint of his if you want to be of those who have reached the highest degrees of sublime contemplation…[28]

Whatever meaning he gives to the term *āl*, 'close ones' or 'mirage', clearly for Ibn ʿArabī the expression *āl Muhammad* does not specifically refer to the family of the Prophet *stricto sensu.* What is the position with the concept of *ahl al-bayt*?

We are given an essential indication on this in the *Jawāb mustaqīm*, a treatise in which Ibn ʿArabī responds, point by point, to Tirmidhī's questionnaire, as he does in Chapter 73 of the *Futūhāt*, but using much more succinct wording. Thus, to the question 'What is the meaning of his expression *Ahlu baytī amān li ummatī*?',[29] he limits his reply to quoting the saying attributed to the Prophet: 'Salmān is one of us, the "People of the house"' (*Salmān minnā ahlu l-bayt*).[30]

A pithy reply, certainly, but nonetheless enlightening. An eminent Companion, Salmān had no bond of kinship to the Prophet, and moreover he was a foreigner, a non-Arab (*ʿajamī*).[31] Thus, Ibn ʿArabī means that blood ties are not *a priori* an indispensable condition for claiming the privilege of belonging to the Prophet's family. But what then are the criteria which in his view define belonging to the *ahl al-bayt*? And in what way does he see the singular case of Salmān constituting a reference point on the matter?

Doubtless the deliberately elliptical nature of the *Jawāb* is intended only to sharpen the reader's curiosity and inspire him to seek further elucidation in other texts throughout the corpus of akbarian literature. Such explanation is to be found in Chapter 29 of the *Futūhāt*, the title of which informs us that it has bearing on 'knowledge of the secret of Salmān by virtue of which the Prophet admitted him to the *ahl al-bayt*, and that of the spiritual poles from whom he inherited it'.[32] Very significantly, this is the theme of the *ʿubūdiyya mahda*, 'pure servanthood', which Ibn ʿArabī addresses as a first step. This expression means for him the ultimate state of spiritual perfection, that of the *awliyāʾ*, who, having disentangled themselves from all will of their own, from all creatures and things, to the point of fully realising the sentence in the *Futūhāt* which summarises the essential teaching of the *shaykh al-akbar* on the matter: 'God wishes you to be with Him as you were when you were not a thing'.[33] No more, no less. It goes without saying

that only the most perfect among the *awliyāʾ*, those who are admitted to the supreme 'station of closeness' described earlier, arrive at this hill-crest.[34]

Ibn ʿArabī says that in any event it is because the Prophet had realised the state of pure servanthood most fully and completely and in all its aspects, that God in return granted to him and his family to be absolutely 'purified', conforming to what is prescribed in verse 33 of the Sura *Al-Ahzāb*, mentioned above, 'God wants only to remove uncleanness from you, oh People of the House, and to purify you fully'. It follows, according to the author of the *Futūhāt*, that whoever is attached to the 'People of the House' is also purified, otherwise the Prophet's family would be tainted with uncleanness. As the Prophet had expressly admitted Salmān to his family, Salmān necessarily enjoyed the prerogative granted to the *ahl al-bayt.*[35] Ibn ʿArabī emphasises, however, that there is a difference between those who are purified by virtue of their attachment to the Prophet's family (the case of Salmān is an excellent example of this but, as we shall see, by no means unique) and the *ahl al-bayt* proper, i.e. those who belong to the blood-line of the Prophet. This second group, he states, 'are the purified; or rather, they are the very essence of purity!' (*hum ʿayn al-tahāra*).[36] This is an important point because it allows us a glimpse of the fact that Ibn ʿArabī's view of the innate pre-excellence of the *ahl al-bayt* is different from Tirmidhī's.

Well and good. But exactly what meaning does the concept of *tathīr* (purification) carry in Q. 33:33, according to Ibn ʿArabī? What is his view of its consequences from the legal point of view? What attitude does this involve on the part of the commonality of the faithful towards the *ahl al-bayt*? Ibn ʿArabī examines such issues in detail and without evasion in the following part of the text, and insofar as they touch closely on the principal issues of dissension between Sunnis and Shiʿis, it is surprising that this chapter (29) in the *Futūhāt* has not been made the subject of an in-depth study by those who would see Ibn ʿArabī as a 'crypto-Shiʿi'.

Be that as it may, Ibn ʿArabī's position on the first point is unambiguous. *Tathīr* is here synonymous with *ʿisma* (immunity from error),[37] a term redolent with meaning for Sunni theologians, and even more so for their Shiʿi colleagues, referring to the idea that the prophets – and the Imams in the Shiʿi perspective – are exempt from sin.[38] It is therefore important to define what this concept means for Ibn ʿArabī.

The first striking thing in the texts in which he addresses the subject[39] is that he always refers to verse 2 of the Sura *Al-Fath* (Q. 48:2), which paradoxically seems to invalidate the *ʿisma* dogma, since it announces to the Prophet that God has pardoned all his sins, those past and those to come, '*li yaghfira laka Llāh mā taqaddama min dhanbika wa mā taʾakhkhara*' ('That Allah may forgive thee thy faults of the past and those to follow'). Commentators mostly avoid the problem by arguing that the faults referred to are minor faults (*saghāʾir*), committed inadvertently (*sahwan*).[40]

Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic approach is quite different and draws, as always, on the literal meaning in which all contradictions are resolved. What this verse states is, he says, that divine forgiveness (*ghafr*) precedes the committing of a sin (*sabaqat al maghfira wuqūʿ al-dhanab*).[41] Given that *ghafr* etymologically means 'veil' (*sitr*), two possibilities are conceivable: either the veil is interposed between the occurrence of sin and the person who benefits from the *ghafr*, in which case he cannot in any way commit sin of any kind, or the veil is interposed between him and the divine punishment which must normally ensue from the sins which he has committed.[42] The first case quite obviously applies to the person of the Prophet, who is consequently, strictly and literally *maʿsūm*, 'impeccable'.[43]

The second possibility applies to cases involving certain *awliyāʾ*[44] and certainly the *ahl al-bayt*. Sin is indeed the worst of all forms of uncleanness there can be, and according to Ibn ʿArabī, as verse 33 of the Sura *Al-Ahzāb* guarantees the utter purity of the *ahl al-bayt*, it necessarily follows that the latter, like the Prophet, benefit from this *ghufrān*, this divine absolution solemnly proclaimed in the second verse of the Sura *Al-Fath* (Q. 48:2). This is precisely where their essential state of purity comes from; and it is by virtue of the pardon which God has inalienably granted them and which absolves them *in advance* of all sin that they are *mutahharūn*, 'purified'.[45] In other words, the *ʿisma* in question, as applying to the *ahl al-bayt* and unlike the Prophet, does not at all mean that they are incapable of wrongdoing, but that in their case, these acts do not have the status of *dhanab*, 'sin', in the eyes of God and that consequently they are exempt from divine punishment.[46] Ibn ʿArabī notes, moreover, that this forgiveness will only

manifest in the Hereafter and that in this world the *ahl al-bayt* are subject to legal penalties when they infringe the law.[47]

Ibn ʿArabī emphasises, however, that it is incumbent upon every Muslim to firmly believe that God has already pardoned the *ahl al-bayt* for all the wrongdoing that they might be likely to commit, and hence to abstain from blaming them in any way, even when one might oneself be the victim of their actions.[48] 'If you truly loved God and His Envoy,' he states, 'then you would love the "People of the Envoy's House". You would find beautiful all that comes from them to you which goes against your nature or desire, and rejoice that it is happening to you.'[49]

In short, on the question of knowing to whom the expression *ahl al-bayt* applies, Ibn ʿArabī's response is once again unequivocal. It applies, on the one hand, to the *shurafāʾ*, i.e. the descendants of Fātima, and, on the other, to those like Salmān, who are linked to the *ahl al-bayt* and who thus equally enjoy divine absolution as promised in the second verse of the Sura *Al-Fath*.[50]

The fact remains that this scarcely clarifies the unusual status of Salmān and the nature of the secret which earned him the honour of being attached to the Prophet's family. The information on the subject mainly appears at the beginning and end of the chapter, but can only be properly understood if we correlate it with other texts of the *Futūhāt* in which Ibn ʿArabī brings in the figure of Salmān.

The first lines of Chapter 29 bear, as I have said, on the concept of 'pure servanthood', in support of which Ibn ʿArabī begins by quoting two hadiths, one after the other. The first speaks of the *mawālī*, emancipated slaves:[51] 'A family's freedman is part of the family' (*mawlā al-qawm minhum*).[52] In fact, according to the account recorded notably by Ibn Ishāq, Salmān was a slave in Medina at the time of his conversion to Islam and was freed thanks to the Prophet, who arranged the conditions of his manumission. Because of this, he has the status of the Prophet's *mawlā*, which *de facto* attaches him to the *ahl al-bayt*.

Yet the 'secret' which is the basis of his privileged relationship with the Prophet does not lie in this socio-legal status, which incidentally he shares with many other *mawālī*[53] but, quite obviously, in his sainthood. The second hadith mentioned by Ibn ʿArabī in the introductory paragraph is very revealing in this respect: 'The men of the Qurʾān are the men of God and His elite' (*ahlu l-Qurʾān hum ahlu Llāh wa khāssatuhu*).[54] Now, if we refer back to the beginning of Chapter 73 of the *Futūhāt* in which Ibn ʿArabī lists the various categories of saint, we find that one of them exactly matches the terms of this hadith,[55] with Ibn ʿArabī saying specifically that it is one of those 'whose character is the Qurʾān'. This is once again an allusion to the highest degree of spiritual perfection, which is, first and foremost, that of the Prophet – 'his character was the Qurʾān', as his wife ʿĀʾisha stated;[56] and secondly, of those spiritual persons who, having reached the pinnacle of *ittibāʿ al-nabī* (following the prophet), are wedded to his spiritual states. 'He whose character is the Qurʾān', he states elsewhere on the subject, 'he has raised up the Prophet from his tomb'.[57] It is also noteworthy, in Chapter 29, that Ibn ʿArabī illustrates this hadith by reporting his own experience of 'absolute servanthood', which forms a sort of seal on the highest degree of sainthood.

But it is only after expanding on the concept of *ahl al-bayt* that Ibn ʿArabī really addresses the case of Salmān and states that he had received his spiritual inheritance from the Poles who attained the supreme station of 'absolute servanthood'.[58] The mention of Khidr as being one of these Poles is also an indication to take into account.[59] It means that Ibn ʿArabī has most particularly in mind those of the *awliyāʾ* he considers to be the authentic spiritual heirs of the Prophet, the *Malāmiyya.*[60] Two other texts from the *Futūhāt* clarify this point. On the one hand, there is a passage at the end of Chapter 309, which is entirely devoted to the *Malāmiyya*, in which Ibn ʿArabī states, 'The *Malāmiyya* constitute the supreme category [of saints] and are the lords of this exemplary Way. … Salmān al-Fārisi was one of the most eminent among them and one of the Prophet's Companions in this station, which is the divine station in this world'.[61] In addition, in Chapter 14, in a long passage on the 'station of general prophethood', and we have seen that this is the ultimate station which the saints can attain, Ibn ʿArabī notes that the spiritual people who attain this station are those who preserve the 'spiritual states' (*ahwāl*) of the Prophet and his knowledge, and he mentions Salmān among those who reached that spiritual abode in the Prophet's lifetime.[62]

Thus we have three indications of the spiritual status of Salmān, at once precise and mutually complementary, since each one of them expresses the idea that this illustrious Companion of the Prophet was in his time a saint out of the ordinary in the truest sense. He indeed belongs to the category of the *Malāmiyya*, who are, in the eyes of the *shaykh al-akbar*, the most perfect of the *awliyā*ʾ in that they completely adhere to the maximum extent possible, to the model of sainthood arising from the specific heritage of the Prophet. In addition, he had arrived at the 'station of closeness' and that is given only to a very few *Malāmiyya*, those who have fully realised 'pure servanthood' and whom Ibn ʿArabī has designated the *Afrād*, the 'Singular Ones'.[63]

It is clear from all this that for Ibn ʿArabī the concept of *ahl al-bayt* has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, it means the Prophet's family in the usual meaning of the term, i.e. the *ahl al-kisā*ʾ, which goes without saying, and the *shurafā*ʾ, the descendants of Fātima. The blood-ties which unite them to the Prophet guarantee them a sort of *ʿisma* since they will be resurrected *maghfūran lahum*, 'forgiven', and thus exempt from all divine punishment. He includes in this, moreover, an unwavering devotion from the faithful without distinction of person, a point on which Ibn ʿArabī insists. The Prophet's family is one whole, and the love given and due to them may not be partial.[64]

But added to these descendants 'according to the flesh' are descendants 'according to the spirit' (with the understanding that the same person may in some cases combine both lineages). Indeed, following Tirmidhī, Ibn ʿArabī considers that his spiritual heirs, the *Malāmiyya*, whom he designates by the generic term 'Muhammadians' and who thus have the specific characteristic of having realised 'pure servanthood' fully and in all its aspects, which was the characteristic of the spiritual attitude of the Prophet and his relation to God, do also belong to the 'Prophet's House'.

It is moreover this meaning of 'spiritual posterity' that Ibn ʿArabī considers in the long passage in Chapter 73 of the *Futūhāt* in which he replies, this time in a discursive manner, to Tirmidhī's famous question on the meaning of the hadith '*Ahlu baytī amān li ummatī*'.[65] Having yet again emphasised that 'servanthood' is the essential attribute of the Prophet (*sifatuhu*), he declares: 'The People of his House are those who possess the same attribute as him [i.e. pure servanthood].'[66]

And these are the exceptional beings whose renunciation perpetuates the 'excellent model' (Q. 33:21) embodied by the Prophet during his lifetime, who are the guardians of his *umma*, his community. They especially protect it against the greatest peril, which is that of eternal damnation. Indeed, what particularly interests Ibn ʿArabī here is the soteriological role that the tribe of Muhammadian saints will play in the Hereafter, when the hour of the Last Judgement has sounded.

I have already had occasion in an earlier study to address at length Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of universal salvation and its scriptural foundations.[67] There are many texts in which he examines the question, and although they all converge towards a certain form of beatitude, more or less long term, for all men without exception, the essential idea being that the mercy of God will absolutely outweigh His just anger, yet the argument on which they rest is nothing less than repetitive. Each of them in fact views the final triumph of the divine *rahma* according to a different perspective, which always unfolds towards the light of this or that verse, or, in this case, this or that hadith, and in the meditation on which Ibn ʿArabī draws the certainty that 'God will mercify everything'.[68]

Thus, he here interprets the hadith *Ahlu baytī amān li ummatī* as a joyful prediction. 'Consider then,' he exclaims, 'the Divine mercy accorded to the *umma* of Muhammad which these words contain!'[69] He then points out that, just as God preserved the honour of the 'Prophet's House' in this lower world by imposing very strict rules of conduct on his wives, so he will watch over the safeguard of that honour in the hereafter by not allowing a single member of his *umma* to eternally suffer divine punishment, 'due to the blessing of the *ahl al-bayt*'. Now, Ibn ʿArabī says this many times over and repeats it in this passage,

The Community of the Prophet is, from one point of view, the whole of humanity, inasmuch as the Prophet was sent to all mankind in conformity with what Revelation proclaims (Q. 34:28), at first carrying out his mandate in an invisible manner by the intermediary of the prophets who went before him and who were his 'substitutes' (nuwwāb), and then in a manifest manner from the

moment that he was raised among men. Thus the umma of Muhammad stretches from Adam to the last man there will be. From this point of view, all belong to Muhammad and all will receive the blessing of the ahl al-bayt and all will be blessed.[70]

'He who loves God in all sincerity,' says Ibn ʿArabī in the long chapter of the *Futūhāt* devoted to love, 'is *maqtūl*, killed, annihilated.'[71] It is thus for the Muhammadian saints, those 'pure servants' who out of love for God have rid themselves of their ego and all things to the point of becoming 'without name and without quality'.[72] A sacrificial death, given as a whole-offering to the 'Lord of the worlds', in exchange for which these 'simple annihilated souls'[73] ask for nothing, but by virtue of which God undertakes to pay them the blood price (*al-diya*), the promise that in recompense for their exemplary sainthood, no one shall eternally incur divine anger.

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Notes

[1]. This does not prevent many Sunni authors from mentioning it without questioning its authenticity, especially so with Hakīm Tirmidhī in the *Nawādir al-usūl* (Beirut, 1992), II, p. 101, *asl* 222; Muhibb al-Dīn Tabarī, *Dharāʾir al-ʿuqba*, ed. F. Bauden (Cairo, 2004), no. 57; Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī, *Al-Sawāʿiq al-muhriqa* (Istanbul, 2003), p. 261, no. 12.

[2]. See Tabarī, *Dharāʾir al-ʿuqba*, Ch. 5; Ibn Hajar, *Sawāʿiq*, pp. 260ff.

[3]. Cf. *EI*2, '*Ahl al-bayt*'; M. Amir-Moezzi, 'Considérations sur l'expression "dīn ʿAlī", Aux origines de la foi Shiite', in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 150/1 (Mainz, 2000), pp. 29–68; M. Sharon, '*Ahl al-Bayt* – People of the House', in *JSAI*, 8 (1986), pp. 169–84.

[4]. Q. 11:73, 28:12, 33:33.

[5]. Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* (Beirut, n.d.), XXII, pp. 5–7.

[6]. For more on this, cf. *EI*2, '*mubāhala*'; Massignon, *Opera minora* (Paris, 1969) I, pp. 550–72.

[7]. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīm* (Beirut, 1999), IV, pp. 220–21.

[8]. *Nawādir*, II, pp. 103–108.

[9]. Concerning the famous hadith '*Innī tārikun fīkum al-thaqalayn, kitābu Llāh wa ʿitratī*'; cf. Wensinck, *Concordance de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden, 1955), I, p. 271. In an appendix to the *Manāzil al-qurba* (ed. Khalid Zahrī, Rabat, 2002, pp. 93–8), Tirmidhī states that this hadith is from the 'People of Kūfa' who, according to him, are hardly trustworthy in the matter of transmission due to their Shiʿi sympathies; even were it authentic, he explains that this hadith simply means that the faithful should respect the rights of the 'People of the house', in the usual sense of the term – not that they possess any authority. In the *Nawādir* (I, pp. 163–4, *asl* 50), Tirmidhī also comments on this hadith without discussing its authenticity, but he nevertheless stresses that one should not conclude that the *ahl al-bayt* enjoy *ʿisma*, impeccability being the exclusive prerogative of the prophets.

[10]. More precisely this refers to the *awliyāʾ* whom Tirmidhī designates as the *Abdāl* or the *Siddīqūn*; cf. *Nawādir*, II, p. 103; *Kitāb Khatm al-awliyāʾ*, ed. O. Yahya (Beirut, 1965), pp. 344 and 345–6; ed. B. Radtke (Beirut, 1992), *K. Sīrat al-awliyāʾ*, pp. 44–5; see also Radtke and O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Mysticism* (Richmond, 1996), pp. 109, 111.

[11]. The *Nawādir* was published for the first time in ah1293 in Istanbul.

[12]. Nabhānī writes about this in detail in an addendum to his *Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ* entitled *Asbāb al-taʾlīf* (Beirut, n.d.), pp. 332–3.

[13]. Nabhānī often quotes the *Futūhāt*, but there is nothing to confirm that he always understood it; see M. Chodkiewicz on this subject, 'La somme des miracles des saints de Nabhānī', in *Miracles et karāma*, ed. D. Aigle (Brepols, 2000), pp. 607–22.

[14]. *Kitāb Khatm al-awliyāʾ*, pp. 344 and 345–6; Radtke and O'Kane, *Concept of Sainthood*, pp. 109, 111.

[15]. Cf. M. Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage* (Paris, 1992), pp. 45–6, 51.

[16]. *Futūhāt*, Bulāq edn, ah 1329 (henceforth *Fut.*) I.545–6.

[17]. Formulaic prayer known by the name of *tasliya Ibrāhīmiyya* which appears in most of the canonical collections; cf. Wensinck, III, p. 282.

[18]. Ibn ʿArabī emphasises that one should understand that the Prophet made this recommendation following a divine revelation, in the certitude that this request by the faithful would be granted.

[19]. Wensinck, II, p. 260.

[20]. Cf. on this theme, M. Chodkiewicz, *Le sceau des saints* (Paris, 1986), pp. 77, 175–6; trans. by L. Sherrard into English as *The Seal of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 50–51, 114, 137.

[21]. Ibn ʿArabī states that *ijtihād*, interpretation of the law, is part of *nubuwwat al-tashrīʿ* entrusted to the *ʿārifūn*; if, however, these latter belong to the family of the Prophet, they combine the status of the *āl Muhammad* with that of the *ahl al-bayt*, as was the case for Hasan and Husayn.

[22]. Cf. alwaraq.net, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, '*āl*'.

[23]. This questionnaire appears in the *Khatm al-awliyāʾ*, ed. O. Yahya, pp. 142–325; ed. B. Radtke, pp. 20–29; Radtke and O'Kane, *Concept of Sainthood*, pp. 71–86. It should be noted that the numbering and sometimes formulation of the questions vary between the different editions.

[24]. *Fut.* II.127–8; O.Y. edn, XIII.153ff.

[25]. On this subject, see the interpretation given by Ibn ʿArabī of verse 39 of the sura *Al-Nūr*, in *Fut.* I.193; II.269, 338; and the highly clarifying remarks by M. Chodkiewicz, 'Maître Eckhart and Ibn ʿArabī' in *Mémoire dominicaine*, no. 15, p. 26; and in *Un océan sans rivage*, p. 61, and n.18 on p. 177.

[26]. *Fut.* III.251–2.

[27]. Jīlī, *Al-Kamālāt al-ilāhiyya fi l-sifāt al-Muhammadiyya* (Beirut, 2004), p. 104.

[28]. *Fut.* III.252.

[29]. *Jawāb* in *K. Khatm al-awliyāʾ*, O.Y. edn (Beirut, 1965), p. 320; this is the one hundred and fiftieth question which precedes the one relating to the expression *āl Muhammad*.

[30]. This hadith, which does not appear in any of the canonical collections, is quoted notably by Ibn Ishāq in *Sīra* (Beirut, 2001), p. 392; on the different listings of this hadith, cf. Massignon, *Opera Minora*, I, 'Salmān Pak', pp. 453–4.

[31]. On the unusual destiny of Salmān, cf. *Sīra* pp. 86ff; Massignon, op.cit., I, pp. 443–83; *EI*2, 'Salmān'.

[32]. *Fut.* I.195–9; O.Y. edn, III.227–42.

[33]. *Fut.* II.13; O.Y. edn, XII.321.

[34]. On the notion of 'pure servanthood', cf. Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage*, pp. 152–61.

[35]. *Fut*. O.Y. edn, III.229–30.

[36]. Ibid, III.230.

[37]. Ibid.

[38]. On *ʿisma*, cf. *EI*2 '*ʿisma*'.

[39]. *Fut.* I.622; II.359; IV.145, 490, where Ibn ʿArabī states that Q. 48:2 is a divine indication of the Prophet's *ʿisma*.

[40]. For the many interpretations of this verse, cf. Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, *juzʾ* XXVI, p. 42; Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Tehran, n.d.), pp. 78–9; Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li ahkām al-qurʾān* (Cairo, 1939), vol. XVI, p. 263; see also C. Addas, *Une victoire éclatante* (n.p., 2005), pp. 53ff.

[41]. *Fut.* I.622; II.359.

[42]. *Fut.* I.622.

[43]. *Jawāb*, question 157, p. 325.

[44]. Ibn ʿArabī describes on several occasions in the *Futūhāt* (I.622, 661; II.491, 512–3, 553; IV.145) the particular case of those *awliyāʾ* who benefit from divine absolution, like the *ahl al-bayt*. This is supported by two hadiths: the first (Muslim, *Fadāʾil al-sahaba*, 161) concerns the combatants at Badr, of whom the Prophet said: 'What do you know about it? It may be that God has seen the People of Badr and said: do what you want, for I have [already] pardoned you.' The second (Muslim, *Tawba*, 29), to which he refers frequently, describes the specific case of a servant who, each time he commits a sin, immediately asks for God's forgiveness, and at the third offence God states: 'My servant has sinned and yet he knew that he has a Lord who forgives sins and sanctions him. Do what you will, I have [already] forgiven you!' This affirmation means, according to Ibn ʿArabī, that as far as this believer is concerned (and on condition that he hears the divine statement addressed to him; see *Fut.* II.215), every form of *tahjīr* (prohibition) is suspended, and all that remains in his case is the legal position of *mubāh*, that which is allowable. Ibn ʿArabī (*Fut.* I.233) compares this suspension of *tahjīr* with what happened to Abraham when he was cast into the fire (Q. 21:69) without suffering injury: the principle governing fire, which normally implies the generation of flames, was on this occasion suspended. In the same way, when these spiritual ones commit wrong, it may appear as such but from the divine point of view – and only from that – it is devoid of the status of sin, as a result of which it attracts no divine punishment; in other words, these *awliyāʾ*, like the *ahl al-bayt*, remain subject to legal penalties in this world.

[45]. *Fut.* O.Y. edn, III.230–1.

[46]. *Fut.* I.622; II.513.

[47]. *Fut.* O.Y. edn, III.231; we should recall (cf. above, n.9) that Tirmidhī believes that *ʿisma* is the exclusive entitlement of the prophets, but he really has in mind the Shiʿi dogma of *ʿisma* which assigns 'impeccability' to the imams in the strict sense of the term, while Ibn ʿArabī envisages it in connection with the *ahl al-bayt* as a form of absolution granted throughout eternity by God.

[48]. Ibid, III.234ff.

[49]. Ibid, III.238. These few lines summarise several long passages that Ibn ʿArabī dedicates to the duty of veneration of the *ahl al-bayt*, which reveals the importance which he attaches to it.

[50]. Ibid, III.230–1.

[51]. For the various accepted meanings of *mawlā*, cf. *EI*2, '*mawlā*'.

[52]. Cf. Wensinck, VII, p. 333.

[53]. See the list of the *mawālī* of the Prophet given, for example, in Tabarī, *Mohammad, sceau des prophètes*, trans. Zotenberg (Paris, 1980), p. 331.

[54]. Wensinck, V, p. 346.

[55]. *Fut.* II.20.

[56]. Cf. Muslim, *Musāfirīn*, 139, which gives a variant of this tradition attributed to ʿĀʾisha; for Ibn ʿArabī's interpretation of this, see in particular *Fut.* III.36 and IV.60.

[57]. *Fut.* IV.61.

[58]. *Fut.* O.Y. edn, III.233.

[59]. Ibid, III.239.

[60]. To understand all the implications of the often allusive remarks given in this chapter (29) on the spiritual status of Salmān, one requires a solid background in akbarian hagiology, especially Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine concerning the *Malāmiyya*; on this subject see the detailed study by M. Chodkiewicz, 'Les *Malāmiyya* dans la doctrine d'Ibn ʿArabī', in *Melāmis-Bayrāmis, études sur trois mouvements mystiques musulmans*(Istanbul, 1998), pp. 15–27.

[61]. *Fut.* III.36.

[62]. Ibid, I.151.

[63]. Ibn ʿArabī notes (*Fut.* O.Y. edn, III.233) that these spiritual persons who have fully realised 'pure servanthood' and thus are directly attached to God Himself (cf. Q. 15:42: 'My servants (*ʿibādī*), you have no power over them') are superior to those who attach themselves to creatures, even though they belong to the Prophet's blood-line.

[64]. Ibid, IV.139.

[65]. Ibid, II.126–7.

[66]. Ibid, II.126; note that here Ibn ʿArabī again quotes the hadith '*ahlu l-Qurʾān…*' and the one about Salmān (*Salmān minnā…*) so as to define the sense which he gives to the expression *ahl al-bayt*.

[67]. *Une victoire éclatante*, pp. 25–79.

[68]. *Fut.* II.220.

[69]. *Fut.* II.126.

[70]. *Fut.* II.127.

[71]. *Fut.* II.350, 354.

[72]. Ibid, IV.13.

[73]. This expression is taken from the title of a beautiful work by Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des âmes simples et anéanties* (Paris, 1984).